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A PLAN FOR HANDLING ADVANCED READING-TEXTS IN MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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In a recent review of the literature of modern language methodology in America for 1912-14, Dr. Carl A. Krause draws the following conclusion: "Of late practically every writer on the subject is in favor of a direct method of teaching modern languages in the United States: the Reform has carried the day."¹ But if we turn from this exultant note to the conditions that actually confront us in the high schools of the country, we must admit that thus far the victory is a paper one, which it will take years to make real. Professor Judd has well described the situation in his excellent chapter on "Foreign Languages." He writes: "We praise the direct method and follow the analytical method, with strong leanings toward the grammatical method."² Those who have championed the reform must therefore proceed with all diligence to the training of recruits in the use of the new weapons, or the gain will be an empty one. One phase of such training is assuredly the multiplying of suggestions as to schemes or devices for handling the material of the subject in accordance with the principles adopted.

As a contribution, therefore, to such practical devices for classroom work, the following suggestion is offered for the treatment of reading-texts in the third and fourth years of the high-school course. It is perhaps unnecessary to say that it is the product of actual high-school experience. It is also a direct outgrowth of the writer's own personal method of acquiring a foreign vocabulary without utterly spoiling the continuity of his reading.

As every experienced teacher knows, the practical difficulties that prevent a rapid and intelligent reading of an advanced

¹ *Monatshefte für deutsche Sprache und Pädagogik*, XVI, 260.

² C. H. Judd, *Psychology of High-School Subjects* (Ginn & Co., 1915), p. 245.

foreign text may be summed up under the headings: (1) Constructions; (2) Vocabulary. No matter what method has been used, a pupil usually arrives at the third year of high-school language with perhaps one hundred fifty pages of very elementary reading behind him. He is now expected to take up work almost entirely based on a reading-text. If this work is to be really enjoyable and profitable to him, he must be able to do something besides merely continue the piecemeal-assignment plan so frequently followed up to this point, and apparently made necessary in the first two years by the large amount of new grammatical material. He must be taught to look at his text as a unit, or a collection of units; he must be able to locate the parts of his sentence at a glance; he must speedily acquire a larger vocabulary, so that the dictionary or word-list need not be constantly at hand. Otherwise the principles of a direct method will be impossible of application.

I refer to this fundamental need of a change in plan at the beginning of the third year, because I know that many teachers, through lack of inventiveness and lack of suggestion, continue throughout the course to assign "three pages in advance" in the same manner that they assigned fifteen lines in advance the first year. I suggest the accompanying plan, not as the only good one by any means, but as a stimulus to further invention of working devices. After outlining the plan, a discussion of its advantages and disadvantages will be in place. It consists of the following processes:

1. *A natural unit of the text is read aloud in the foreign language.*
—The teacher selects this unit, if the text is not divided into chapters or scenes. This reading is all done on one day, if possible; mistakes in pronunciation are corrected as made; there is no discussion. The class does part of the reading, the teacher does the rest. The pupils are encouraged in advance to bend all their energies to getting the drift of the meaning. At the conclusion a short summary or outline is called for, either oral or written, in which details are not expected but the main points of progress in the unit are stressed. In case the unit cannot be read to the end in one period, the unread portion is assigned as home work; but this is inadvisable in the early stages.

2. *The pupils prepare a list of the unknown words and expressions.*—Thus the entire unit is gone over a second time, this time partly as home work and partly, at the beginning, in class, under the teacher's eye. Pupils are urged to impress upon their minds the location of words in the context as much as possible. There is to be no stopping this time to solve knotty problems of construction. Pupils are put on their honor *not* to use a dictionary, vocabulary, or the notes at this point. No definitions are put down. All words are to be put into the name-form as far as the knowledge of the class permits, i.e., nouns into the nominative singular with the definite article; verbs into the infinitive; adjectives into the stem-form. If the simplified form cannot be called to mind, the form in the text is put down for future correction.

3. *The pupils define the words written down.*—This time they are put on their honor not to refer to the text, but to use only the vocabulary or dictionary, and notes. The effort to locate the word in the text *by memory* must be constant. In case this cannot be done, one translation from each group of related meanings in the dictionary or vocabulary is to be taken. This work must be neatly and plainly written in columns, which can later be used readily.

4. *The text is translated with the assistance of the completed list.*—As much or as little of this translation as is desired may be recited in class, but the pupil must in some way give evidence of having got the sense. This is the third time the text is worked over and this time all difficulties must be cleared up. Further reference to helps ought to be unnecessary. After the translation is completed, the lists are handed in and gone over for form, spelling, etc., and then returned to be kept by the pupils.

5. *The unit is again read aloud in the foreign language.*—This time the reading is for expression; the reader is called before the class; as soon as practicable the class sits with closed books. Class and teacher make notes of mistakes, which are corrected at the end of the reading. No interruptions of the reader are permitted. At this stage any discussion of text, question and answer work, summarizing in writing, reproduction, etc., that is desired, may be added.

It will readily become apparent that overlapping of work on two units is not only possible, but desirable. After the class has become acquainted with the plan, as it usually has after working through three such units, the work can be so arranged that the written portion can be assigned for home study and the oral portion done in class, still leaving plenty of time for supplementary exercises in class on other material. Thus, while the pupils are working out the translation of unit 1, the second unit may be read in class, and while the word-list of unit 2 is being prepared, the first unit may be given its final reading. A capable teacher will find no difficulty in fitting the parts of the work into one another.

An objection that will probably suggest itself is the amount of time required to do all this work thoroughly. It is true that more time is required at first, but in every case it has proved that as the pupils grew more familiar with the system, and realized its benefits to them, the progress grew increasingly rapid. It also proved possible later in the year to omit parts of the system without loss. For instance, translation proved entirely superfluous in many cases after the words were looked up, and in a long book a chapter or scene could occasionally be read once and passed over, in case it presented no special difficulties.¹ In every class where this plan was tried the gain in power and confidence was noticeable, making possible much more outside reading work. It is worth much to have a class conscious of its power to read a book as a book, and not as a collection of fragments.

One or two concrete illustrations may not be out of place. One year, with a fourth-year class not previously trained to this system, very nearly four whole weeks were spent on the first chapter of Hauff's *Lichtenstein*. The class was mediocre in ability and the word-lists were long, averaging some fifteen words per page. But the pupils were willing and worked according to directions. Toward the end of the book the average number of unknown words was one per page. The whole Holt edition of *Lichtenstein* was read, and progress had been so rapid by the middle of the second

¹ In this connection I should like to call attention to the excellent article by Marian P. Whitney on "The Place of Reading in the Modern Language Course," *Educational Review*, LI, 189. It offers many valuable suggestions for just such varied treatment as I have indicated above.

semester that we felt justified in undertaking Kleist's *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*. This was studied with great relish and read act by act with divided parts on the assembly-room stage. In addition, each member of the class read four hundred pages of German outside of class and gave detailed report on it. While difficult at first, this outside reading in most cases grew to be a pleasure. One boy, absolutely without knowledge of German except as he had learned it in school, read *Frau Sorge* in one day and gave an excellent report on it. A girl of German family, but not fluent in the language from home training, read Scheffel's *Ekkehard* entire and could not be misled as to any detail, although I made every test I could think of. I am sure such results were at least made much easier of attainment by the fact that the class had been accustomed to read a book as a unified work, and had been trained to systematic vocabulary study.

In the only class with which it has been possible for me to test this plan in two consecutive years, there was not a single pupil who did not read twice as much outside of class as I required, and in the last part of the fourth year we frequently translated one hundred lines of *Hermann und Dorothea* at sight, with only very occasional vocabulary trouble. The outside reading of one boy for the fourth year consisted of *Wallensteins Tod* and *Ekkehard*, fully reported on and tested for content.

It seems to me this comes very close to our aim of teaching pupils to read a foreign language with comparative ease in a four-year course. I have never had a four-year course in French, but even in a two-year course we were able to make much use of this device.

I attribute most of my success with this plan to the unrelenting regularity with which it is carried out, especially the word-listing part and the preliminary reading in German. It does away with all the time-wasting looking from text to dictionary, back to text, then to notes, *ad infinitum*. It teaches a text as a unified production with logically made divisions. It helps to do away with constructional difficulties because, in the first place, the pupil goes over a difficult construction twice in cursory fashion before attempting a detailed solution, thus having an opportunity to get familiar with it; and because, in the second place, there is a background of

general knowledge of the whole unit to which to attach the isolated construction. Unusual constructional troubles are dealt with by parsing, analysis, and diagramming. Further, this device actually teaches words, because of the effort expended in trying to associate them by memory with the context, and it practically eliminates the repeated looking up of the same word, which is such a common trouble in ordinary dictionary work. It encourages pupils to look for derivatives. It encourages correct spelling. Finally, it gives a consciousness of power to read books much as books are read in English.

Naturally, there are some disadvantages. The teacher must plan his work more carefully than in the old way. The class is not easily convinced of the use of all the extra writing. The preliminary reading in German is likely to become perfunctory if not carefully watched; this is also true of the making of word-lists. Inaccuracies and lack of thought must be checked up. If there are more serious drawbacks than these, I have failed to discover them in four years' trial. The system adapts itself excellently to direct-method teaching or any modification of it. It was my custom to use German practically exclusively in the classroom, although I could not insist on the pupils' doing so constantly, owing to conditions with which this plan had nothing to do.

Having thus profited myself by working out this plan in detail, I submit it to language teachers, in the hope that some may find in it a suggestion for more effective treatment of reading-texts in the two upper high-school classes.